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Latin expert pleads for contra aid

By ALFONSO CHARDY

Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The State Department's ranking Latin America specialist warned Congress Tuesday it would be "a serious mistake" not to restore covert aid to Nicaraguan rebels because it could mean the failure of American policy in the region.

"Nicaragua's freedom fighters deserve the solidarity of the West no less — some would say more, because of the imperative of proximity — than the Afghan rebels or the Polish Solidarity movement," Langhorne Motley, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told the House Western Hemisphere Affairs subcommittee.

Motley's statement to the panel headed by Rep. Michael Barnes, D-Md., marked the Reagan administration's opening salvo to lobby the new Congress for resumption of covert assistance to the rebels, known

as contras, fighting the Sandinista government. Congress suspended aid in October until at least Feb. 28.

Motley argued that the rebels are a necessary component of U.S. policy in the region, as pressure on Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

"If pressure is taken away, the Sandinistas will have no reason to compromise," Motley added. "If the Sandinistas have no reason to compromise, [negotiation] will surely fail. And if [that] fails, the long-run costs to the U.S. in terms of money and lives will be much greater." An aide said Motley was referring to the ultimate possibility of U.S. troops.

Barnes remained unconvinced. He said he would again vote against contra aid when it comes up.

Also unconvinced was Rep. Gerry E. Studds, D-Mass., who told Motley that "whether you like it or not, CIA support for the rebels is dead."